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(Nevada) For TSA workers, program at CSN provides chance to shine

LAS VEGAS - Eleven years ago, Tracey Johnson was working at a bank when she saw the horrors of the 9/11 tragedy spilling from her television.

Today, she works for the Transportation Security Administration at McCarran International Airport and was one of 21 students honored at a ceremony for the inaugural class of the TSA Associates Program at the College of Southern Nevada.

"After seeing that and then hearing about (the TSA program), I wanted to sign up right away," said Johnson, who made remarks on behalf of her class at the event attended by friends and families of the honorees in a small auditorium on CSN's Charleston campus.

The honorees, dressed in their deep blue TSA uniforms, accepted certificates and applause from TSA leaders and CSN educators Wednesday.

Johnson and her classmates were among students taking specialized courses in security and intelligence analysis at 67 schools nationwide, including CSN.

While many TSA agents get on-the-job training as they man the airport checkpoints and inspect baggage, the courses offered at CSN expand on security topics as the agency moves toward risk-based, intelligence-driven analysis.

The first class of honorees took courses on the mission of the Department of Homeland Security, intelligence analysis and security management and transportation and border security.

A fourth class, principles in emergency management, was added to the course series this year and several of the honorees say they'll go back to the classroom to take it. Other courses are planned as the program expands.

Robert Aberle, chairman of the Department of Public Safety and Human Services at CSN, said the program's courses also appeal to emergency management and criminal justice students.

"The partnership between the College of Southern Nevada and the TSA has been tremendous," Aberle said in remarks at the ceremony.

McCarran's federal security director, Karen Burke, and Michael Novak, assistant TSA administrator in the agency's Office of Training and Workforce Engagement in Washington, also spoke at the event.

"Today's a great day for the TSA," Novak said. "You're part of the greater mission of keeping the homeland safe. Each day, you're going to be required to notice things that don't seem right and you have to get it right every day. But a terrorist only has to get it right once."

Novak told them they were part of a noble profession — and most of the time, they have a thankless job.

That seems to be changing.

A Gallup poll released last month said 54 percent of Americans believe the TSA is doing either an excellent or good job of handling security screening at airports and that 85 percent believe the TSA's screening procedures are effective in preventing acts of terrorism on U.S. airliners.

Arian White, a student in a new class of TSA agents seeking certification, said she detected a new level of respect when agents received their new uniforms — and shields not unlike badges law enforcement officers wear.

“I think they made us feel more respected,” she said at a class meeting that was disrupted by Las Vegas’ Tuesday rainstorm.

The TSA’s mantra is “Security first, customer service always,” and students are finding that classroom work is helping them better understand the relationship they have with the 1.8 million passengers who pass through security checkpoints in the U.S. every day — 60,000 a day at McCarran.

“For one of my classes, I wrote a term paper on the liquids ban,” said student honoree Tina Chaffee.

In 2006, the TSA thwarted a terrorist threat from an explosive liquid. That led to a ban of containers containing more than 3 ounces of liquids or gels.

“When I wrote my paper, I did all kinds of research,” Chaffee said. “That helped me explain the reason for the ban when I was on the (checkpoint) line. I think the passenger had a better understanding of what we do and why.”